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Malaysian Foodways: Acculturation/assimilation towards authenticity sustainability among diasporic community

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Abstract

Maintenance of traditional foodways through the authenticity is one of the elements related to the preservation of group identity. Nevertheless, the topic of authenticity sustainability has been relatively neglected in cultural studies until recently. Authenticity is widely evoked in the analysis of antiques, art objects and certain kinds of tourism, but not in discussion of ethnic foods. Authenticity of foods is questionable with the existence of the acculturation and assimilation in the immigrants' cuisine particularly among Malay diasporic community in UK in order to prepare their “home” traditional foods. Therefore, some empirical evidence on this issue needs to be explored.

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Keywords: Malaysian foodways; acculturation and assimilation; authenticity sustainability; Malay diasporic community

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1. Introduction

Migrating to a new country often results in a variety of social and economic challenges, often reflected in foodways. In immigrant perspective, foodways play a significant role in the story both as a conduit to memory and loss and as a daily practice of routine sustenance and the reproduction of tradition and community. The dish or product name conveys the authenticity by association to geographic place, to a time as well as to an ethnic tradition (Bessiere, 1998). Central to the food authenticity dimension are ingredients, locally sourced and unique (Groves, 2001, Moio et al., 2004 and Sims, 2009).

The concept of authenticity is central to almost all present-day research on quality food and many of other studies of consumer culture. Food authenticity, Abarca (2004) argues, can be reduced to two determinants: the authenticity of the cook and the authenticity of the process. What binds the process is the foodstuffs production, which for Kuznesof et al. (1997) represents the situational factors? The authenticity of production process is elevated by its methods simplicity and naturalness (Groves, 2001, Hughes, 1995 and Johnston and Baumann, 2010) and on the other being reflected in the small-scale or non-commercial characteristics of the producing organisation (Carroll and Torfason, 2011 and Johnston and Baumann, 2010). The integrity of the cook too implies authenticity (Beer, 2008) as do celebrity status or product endorsement (Johnston & Baumann, 2010).

On authenticity, Heldke (2003) argues that food is a medium that allows an immediately authentic relationship with a culture or tradition. Therefore, foods are important in connecting peoples and are a cultural showcase. Nevertheless, not many scholars focus on how acculturation and assimilation affect the traditional ethnic foods and foodways towards the authenticity sustainability. Acculturation is a process of learning, practice and customs of a culture which acquiring the capability to function within the dominant culture while retaining one's original culture (Cleveland et al., 2009; Ishak, Zahari, Sharif, & Muhammad, 2012; Lee, 2006; Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001).

Besides that, assimilation occurs when individuals reject their minority culture and adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture (Jamal, 1998; Mukherji, 2005). It creates new food identity as its hallmarks stamp out the originality of minor ethnic food by the dominant ones or alteration in the consumption of the minor ethnic food in a new cultural environment without phase-out the original identity. Adaptation occurred when cultures can coexist within a given environment, retaining some (if not all) of their original/minority-cultural heritage while functioning within and acquiring the traits corresponding to the larger host/mainstream culture in which scholar debated that food adaptation would be one of the important process of formation of food identity (Cleveland et al., 2009; Ishak et al., 2012; Sharif et al., 2012).

In the context of this study, Malay diasporic community in United Kingdom are believed to be adjusted and adapted through the foodways (preparation and consumption) of their current place with the addition of problems in getting the traditional or original ingredients and other sources. Based on this notion, it is also raising a critical question to what extent the acculturation and assimilation affect the authenticity of Malay traditional foods prepared by the diasporic community.

In other words, do the cultural traditions remains intact practices by the Malay diasporic community in different place, are the current foodways practices influenced by the acculturation and assimilation and how the foodways practices influenced the authenticity sustainability of Malay traditional food? In this sense, how the foodways, consisted of preparation (ingredients, equipments, method of cooking) and consumption (consume and serving) are practices among the community, as well as how acculturation and assimilation (adaptation process) influence sustainability of the authentic elements of food prepared by them have not been widely researched.

To date, there are a proliferation of studies looking at an ethnic identity formation, cultural identity, food identity formation and the relationship between acculturation, foodways and acceptance towards the process of food identity formation. However, there is still a limited investigation by particularly looking at the affect of acculturation and assimilation on foodways specifically Malay traditional food and its foodways towards authenticity sustainability and this warrant further exploration or investigation.

Therefore, this research seeks to describe the process of foodways among the diasporic community, how the acculturation and assimilation influence their foodways practices and how the foodways affect the authenticity sustainability. In other words, this study is to reveal the process of foodways (preparation and consumption) among

Malaysian migrants or known as diasporic community in UK and how the acculturation and assimilation influence the foodways and Malaysia authenticity sustainability.

2. Literature review

2.1. Malay traditional food

Malay ethnic group is known to be as the descendants of the tribal proto-Malays, a mixture of modern Indian, Thai, Arab and Chinese ancestry. The pioneer settlement of Malay Peninsula, coastal Borneo, and eastern islands were among the Malays from Sumatran coast and indigenous group from Java and Celebes (Fisher, 1964). The formation of Malay traditional foods occurred earlier and had continuously developed during the trading years received a great influence from neighboring countries (Brissenden, 2010), Thai in northern states while the south region states like Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Johor of having significant influence from Indonesia like Minangkabau, Bugis and Javanese. Ling (2002) noted that despite the various Malay cuisine through its region from north to south, east to coast and East Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak but they are identical in terms of the characteristic of the food itself which are strong, spicy and aromatic, This can be proven through the preparation, methods of cooking, availability and uses of the ingredients like ginger, turmeric, chillies, lemon grass and dried shrimp paste and many others (Evaland, 2011).

Rozin (2006) posited that there are three components of Malay traditional food that differentiates it from other ethnics like Chinese and Indian (a) the staple ingredients, (b) the flavour principles (lemon grass, ginger, chillies, dried herbs and spices) and (c) cooking methods. Ebster and Guist (2004) argued that the authenticity, the originality and the real taste of the Malay cuisine are well dependants those upon three elements plus culture ethnic origin. Traditional authenticity of food in fact expresses the actual meaning of unique internal originality through its taste. Mohammad and Chan (2010) on the other hand revealed that there are four characteristics of authenticity in Malay Kelantan cuisine, which are known as heritage and style persistence, nostalgic, freedom from alteration and assurance.

Wan Hafiz (2005) asserted Malay foods identically acknowledge its trademark through hot and spicy taste. While, Wong (1984) noted bamboo shoot is a common ingredient used in Malay traditional cuisine served in various dishes such as Masak Lemak Rebung. Example of Malay cuisine is curry Rendang (dry, dark, heavy coconut-based curry) which has a combination of Indonesian and Thailand taste. The blending ingredients are ginger, turmeric, chillies, lemongrass, and dried shrimp paste (Brissenden, 2003; Roni, 2010). There are about 120 species of 'Ulam' or Malay's traditional herbs. They served as fresh salad or cooked (Faridah et al., 2006). In east coast Kelantan and Terengganu, Kerabu is used in nasi kerabu and nasi dagang both dishes are served with ulam (fresh herbs or vegetables), solok lada (stuffed green chilli), budu (homemade fish sauce) fish crackers and seafood dishes (Zahari, 2011).

Malay food can also be categorized according to five zones. In northern region states such as Perlis, Kedah, and Kelantan, these regions are located near to boarder Thailand have some likeness to fiery hot spicy and sour flavour to the food (so as Penang food) have some common in ingredients into their cuisine such as lemongrass, galangal, turmeric, chillies, fragrance leaf such as pandan leaf, kaffir lime leaf and the polygonum or daun kesum and daun kemangla (Ling, 2002).

In the southern state of Malaysia, Sharif et al., (2010) noted traditional cuisine in Selangor, Malacca and Johor had some elements of Javanese influence due to migrants of Javanese in the area in the 19th century. In south-east and coast of Peninsular Malaysia, fish and seafood are rubbed with turmeric and deep fried; rojak buah and tangy Acar made from fresh vegetables and fruits and marinated fish, chicken or pieces of meat are grilled over charcoal 'panggang, percik and bakar'.

In general, the characteristics of Malay traditional foods are influenced based on the geographical region as mentioned above. On the other hand, the migrations of the ancestors or older generation, which brought along and practiced the traditional food also contribute to the notion of current food consumption (Bowen and Devine, 2010). Therefore, preserving traditional food through the foodways should be continuous practices (Muhammad et al.,

2013) no matter where the individuals have been. In order to have in-depth understanding of preparation and consumption of foods, the next section discusses the foodways perspective.

2.2. Foodways

Principally, foodway is a combination of two words that are 'food' and 'ways' that refers to the way how food is prepared, served and consumed by human. According to Camp (2009) foodways is a combination and intersection of food and culture while Powell (2007) posit foodways is mean to identify the identity of a community, age, ethnicity, gender, locale, occupation, and religion. Foodways are also a key component of culture and sense of identity (Koc & Welsh, 2002). Counihan and Esterik (2008) recognized and contended the central role of food and foodways in humans' daily life and culture are far beyond an exploration of cooking and consumption.

Foodways is one of the "insignificant techniques of the body" and as such can mark the distinction between peoples and groups. In this sense, Rearick (2009) asserted that different peoples from a different place with different cultures would perform different food preparation and consumption pattern, which reflect the characteristic of their culture and social class.

In each ethnic culture, foodways operate like a language and organized system that through their composition and components express several meanings and contribute to the organization of the natural world (Mintz, 1996; Cook & Crang, 1996; Bell & Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997). Regardless of various interpretations, the most suitable terms in the context of this study are that foodways are the preparation and consumption of food characterized by individuals and society (Gutierrez, 1999; Freeman, 2002; Cusak, 2003; Kurlansky, 2004; Gold, 2007; Williams, 2007). All these scholars indeed argued that foodways not only refer to food and cooking, but to all food-related behaviors, concepts and beliefs shared by a particular group of people and give importance view towards their identity.

Therefore, it is important for the ethnic people especially the immigrant or diasporic community to practice their foodways, which not only can reflect their identity but also preserving their food authenticity.

2.3. Authenticity

Among various cultural factors representing national identity, food is cited as a common signifier because food itself can be a cultural symbol (Deles, 2004). It has often been observed that food can penetrate foreign cultures and bridge cultural barriers (Cook, 1997). Food can be defined as a part of the culture of a country and simultaneously as representing that culture. Accordingly, foods from other countries can appeal to foreigners as unique and sometimes exotic characteristics reflecting the culture of a country. This uniqueness and difference are often referred to as 'authenticity.' This authenticity factor has a strong impact on customers in other countries and is an important element of ethnic foods that differentiates them from the local cuisine (Chandon et al., 2000; Peabody, 1985; Leclerc et al., 1994).

The word of authenticity has various definitions by many scholars from the various fields. Therefore, in this first stage it is important to discuss the meaning of the word authenticity from the perspective of gastronomy. In general, the concept of authenticity evokes a range of meanings which is reflected the original, genuine, real, true or true to itself (Pratt, 2007). On the other hand, Heldke (2003) identifies three key definitions of authenticity in food for gastronomy field. Authenticity of food according to him is purely different or novel, which is distinct from native' authenticity, that is a food experience produced by and in a specific culture. In other words, the authenticity of foods is used to refer to a genuine version of a product in relation to a specific place, region or country (Groves, 2001).

Authenticity, as stated by Pratt (2007), is a quality attributed to a range of foods and cuisines. He further explained that it involves two main aspects. First, there is food specific to a location, and second, the food products are the result of a craft process. These two aspects are normally found together and both rest on an appeal to tradition. The food is the product of a continuous and collective endeavor; it pre-dates industrialized food systems, and its value derives from that opposition.

2.4. Authenticity sustainability

For diasporic communities, maintenance of ‘traditional’ eating habits is a means of preserving group identity as the use or avoidance of certain foods becomes identified with a group and symbolic of it (Kalcik, 2008). Such symbolic foodways may strengthen the group’s internal ties or indicate out-group status. The authenticity according to her becomes one of the elements related to the preservation of group identity. Therefore, food and foodways are not unattached from the traffic and flows of people. Some scholars have already recognized this relationship, for example, Phillips (2006) not only examines food through the globalization framework, but also globalization to include “mobile bodies” through the context of food. Slocum’s (2011) review of food studies and race includes scholars who have engaged with migrants and their food practices: the use of food as sensual bridges to home (Ahmed et al. 2003), the use of substitute ingredients in “home” recipes (Cwiertka 2003) and among others, the establishment of grocery stores that remind buyers of their homeland (Mankekar 2005).

Migrants who engage in such practices demonstrate translocal subjectivity (Conradson and McKay, 2007). This type of subjectivity highlights three facets in the experiences of those who occupy more than one social field in the transnational scale. According to the scholars, first is an individual’s ability to travel and inhabit a place (sometimes more than one place at a time). Second, a migrant’s affinity to their particular locality (for example, this can refer to a province in the Philippines,) and three, the emotional status of the immigrant that comes with the constant negotiation of mobility and emplacement, whether with the body or in the mind.

2.5. Acculturation and assimilation

The concept of acculturation has been studied scientifically since 1918 (Rudmin, 2003). Acculturation explains the process of cultural and psychological change or alteration that results following meeting between cultures (Sam & Berry 2010). The effects of acculturation can be seen at multiple levels in both interacting cultures. At the group level, acculturation often results in changes and alteration to culture, customs, and social institutions (Kramer, 1997). It has been hypothesized that in order for acculturation to occur, some relative cultural equality has to exist between the giving and the receiving culture.

Two distinct models have guided Acculturation Definition: a linear model and a two-dimensional model (Berry, 1986). The linear model is based on the assumption that a strong ethnic identity is not possible among those who become involved in the mainstream society, and that acculturation is inevitably accompanied by a weakening of ethnic identity. Alternatively, the two-dimensional model suggests that both the relationship with the traditional or ethnic culture and the relationship with the new or dominant culture play important roles in the process. Using the two-dimensional model, Berry, (1986) has suggested that there are four possible outcomes of the acculturation process: assimilation (movement toward the dominant culture), integration (synthesis of the two cultures), rejection (reaffirmation of the traditional culture), or marginalization (alienation from both cultures).

Similarly, Sodowsky and Plake (1991) have defined three dimensions of acculturation: assimilation, biculturalism (the ability to live in both worlds, with denial of neither), and observance of traditionality (rejection of the dominant culture). Out of many interpretations on acculturation, the third outcome (integration) given by Berry (1986) is suit for the present study. In this third outcome, acculturation through integration occurs when dominant group can adapt the cultural norms of minority while maintaining their minority culture of origin or individuals are able to adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin.

2.6. Food identity

Identity contributes developing the nation building, form unity, sharing similar territories, economy, traditional facet, embody language, culture, name and cohesiveness among the ethnic groups in turn share a common identity (Husin, 2011) which lead to loyalty towards the country and surpasses devotion route of each ethnic (Hippler, 2002). Demo (1992), Abram (1996), Frable (1997) and Esser (1998) noted that as society in multicultural countries are more complex, common perception and acceptable identity are considered to be an important issue. Identity in education, economy, culture and many others are central focus in such countries and although formation of

acceptable identity involve longitudinal processes, efforts in fostering it through integration among the ethnic groups are undertaking with food identity without an exception (Spurrier, 2010).

In fact, food identity formation especially in the multicultural countries is one of the recent topic and start to receive significant attention among the academic scholars (Epp & Price, 2008; Fox & Ward, 2008; Helland, 2008) as food identity is less sensitive as opposed to religions, politics and economy (Cozzi, 2005; Miller, 2006).

Based on the quotation, it is clearly mentioned that intrinsic role is one of the important factors in defining individual's culture and society. Hence, authenticity as one of the intrinsic factors in retaining the image of ethnic tradition is worth to study. As this study will explore on changes of foodways processes among the Malay diasporic community, it is important to understand on how people normally adapt the other culture practices in order to sustain their own culture.

3. Conclusion

Foodways towards the traditional foods are believed to be still occurring in diasporic community. Nevertheless, a lack of available studies looking at the impact of acculturation and assimilation on foodways towards the authenticity sustainability among the community migrants means the insights and in-depth understanding obtained from this study directly contribute to the global sociological food literature as well as to Malaysian food literature. In other words, the originality of this research will create or expand the Malaysian food body of knowledge and extend and enhance the gastronomical literatures globally. With that, some empirical evidence on those mentioned issue need to be explored and it is still under investigation.

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